

Notes from a Wandering Spirit

By Sander Nieuwenhuizen

F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” To be effective as a leader and to help others be effective as well, I have tried to develop this capacity.

Learning comes through shocks and sometimes it takes a while before the penny drops. For me it came together when the Spanish HR director at GE was visibly shaking in his boots every time I would fly to Madrid to visit him. I was a 25-year-old graduate in my first job. A few years later, I found out why he was shaking; you will read it in this essay. I then learned something about people, myself and perspectives: there are multiple. I learned to play with perspectives and hold those two opposed ideas in my mind.

I like to rationally wander in my mind, but also through imagination. There are some very powerful techniques to visualize future scenarios. They help me to navigate the

great switches in life, but also to find the illusive restaurant with a pergola off Route Nationale.

You will read lots of wandering in this essay. But do note, as the bumper sticker in my study at home states, "Not all who wander are lost." I invite you to accompany me on my journey.

Have you ever noticed that when laughter erupts in a meeting, it often means that someone has hit upon a truth? It's another perspective on the matter at hand, juxtaposed to the generally accepted view that is being put forward. It's a joke, right? Sure, but there is a truth in there too. It's unexpected, and if brought lightly or with mock earnestness, then this comment or joke will pass and can actually move the meeting to another level.

What is that capacity that allows one to do that? To move a meeting, a team, an organization, to see things differently and create room for new growth.

My favorite quote is from the early 20th century author F. Scott Fitzgerald who wrote, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." Over the years, I have tried to develop this capacity to apply different perspectives to problems I was working on. Early in my career there were several 'aha!' moments that made me look at my role and position through the eyes of others. I gained an appreciation of the roles we play and the perspective we bring into a situation. It created an extra lens I could use in my mind to understand situations better. This is the mind wandering rationally.

At a deeper level, our mind can wander into imaginations, subconsciously as dreams, or consciously as visualizations. This can be a powerful way to imagine the future. When you realize that everything you see around you started with an idea, you are in awe. This capacity to imagine, to visualize before building, is important to me as a deeper current and motivator.

Bringing these qualities, perspective and imagination together, and giving it a direction or taking the lead allows me to make decisions. And, if I am really lucky, I can even make that comment, introduce that opposed idea that is a truth, and subsequently move the meeting, the whole team, to a higher level.

There was a rumor going around that my parents were good friends of Jack Welch

Here are some of the experiences and theories that have influenced the way I make sense of things, and in turn how I lead. In my first job in the late eighties I traveled around Europe to implement new salary and bonus schemes for General Electric. I remember going to Spain, to the GE Medical Systems plant in Torrejon outside of Madrid, and being received by HR Director Sanchez. In his mid fifties, he stemmed from another era, and as you saw more often back then in Southern European countries with tough unions, the personnel director had a police or military background. So here was this 25-year-old kid from headquarters in Paris, flying in to reorganize the salary planning philosophy and systems as well as the incentive plans for the salesforce. I didn't think anything of it. A few years later, a colleague told me that at the time there was a rumor going around the office (which I never heard) that my parents were good friends of Jack Welch, the famous CEO of GE at the time. Someone had given me a Cross pen with the GE emblem. Apparently, this Cross pen, a rare prize for the inner circle of GE leadership, had kicked off this rumor. It then dawned on me that the combination of being from HQ and supposedly close to Jack Welch made Sanchez shake in his boots. As a fresh graduate in his first job, from the egalitarian Netherlands, I never thought that this would play such an important role.

There is a theory that you pass through three longitudinal phases when you go and live in another country. In the first phase, you are surprised and sometimes frustrated about how

things are done in your new home: 'Why would they do it like this?' Then, this may take a few years when you live in France, you start to see the advantages: 'This is not so foolish after all.' Or: 'Why do those idiots back in Holland not copy this?' The third phase, not always attained by those who emigrate to the United States, is that you can see the pros and cons of both cultures and how they're related. Hopefully, you also see how you can combine some pros, without always getting the cons along with it.

You can only play that counterpoint role when you are inside and outside at the same time

In this way, expatriation is a phenomenal trigger for awareness: 'How do I operate?' 'What is the context?' And 'What is the dynamic between the two?' To realize that the same behavior can be very effective in a certain context and very ineffective in another leads you to reflect on your underlying values and motivations.

Much in our emerging global performance-oriented culture puts the emphasis on single-minded focus, on applying oneself, on being relentless and monomaniac, all in order to achieve excellence. However, it is actually equally important for a leader to have an open mind and be able to see more perspectives. You should be able to switch from focus to helicopter view, and see your own behavior within the context.

Two benefits come with this new insight. Firstly, it allows you to not only see the roles we play, but also see it from the perspective of the other(s). Over the last fifteen years, I have had teams, or part of my teams, in Asian countries. During my interactions, I would consciously remind myself of the positional power that is conferred on a Vice President. In India, you are practically a god; again, far from our Dutch egalitarian frame. Putting people truly at ease in

these situations allows them to be more open and express themselves more freely. I do that by sharing something personal, preferably something that shows that I don't have all the wisdom either. This encourages others to volunteer valuable information which in turn allows you to make better overall decisions.

The second benefit is the ability to be a counterpoint and stay connected at the same time. Paul Evans, professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD, used to say that HR needs to be the counterpoint in an Executive Committee. I quite agree. In an HR role, you often find yourself arguing several points (e.g. the longer term effect on leadership pipeline and culture, the impact on morale in the organization, the development of the brand, and the capability to attract talent) that are not directly the at the core of an ExCo agenda, which is more directed at operational progress and finance. To be able to argue these counterpoints, you need this awareness of roles, motivations and values, as described before. When mixed together in good measure and then tested in the real world, it makes you more comfortable in your own skin, it is also called being authentic. To move the conversation along in an ExCo meeting, you need to see that other perspective and be able to play that counterpoint role. And this can only be done effectively and credibly, if you are authentic, if you stay connected to the conversation and the team. Being inside and outside at the same time.

In my mind I actively think about these things. Over the last thirty years, I have made an almost annual pilgrimage to St Luc in Switzerland to hike for a weekend on my own. There is nothing better than walking (particularly slowly, going up the mountain) to get the mind in a reflective mode. First, I think about recent, current and upcoming events. Applying my understanding of roles and context – playing scenarios through in my mind. That's usually the first several hours of the hike. It actually starts already the evening before on the plane and during the drive from Geneva to St

Luc. Once the current affairs have been digested, and as a result some peace on how things went and some ideas for the upcoming events have emerged, then it's time to dream.

During my studies in Amsterdam I had a serious fling with New Age, from Krishnamurti to Fritjof Capra and meditation in the Kosmos on the Prins Hendrikkade. I retained many nuggets from that period. One of them is a seven-step process from Hans Korteweg. It's a thoughtful visualization technique that lets you develop a wish (a true wish, not an ego-wish) and play that wish out in your mind and already reap the benefits of joy as if you had realized your wish (or, as if your wish had been granted, to say it less heroically).

Up in the mountains I use this technique for the more fundamental switches one goes through in life (you can also use it to visualize a restaurant off the Route Nationale, where you will dine at the end of the day under a pergola). Although I stick to the seven steps religiously, the sixth being 'letting go' and the seventh being 'rest' (the seventh day – “and God saw it was good”), I do go back after a while to what needs to be done concretely. But the dream, the visualized wish, is now the background, the inspiration, for the plans and activities that are to be developed.

The exercise takes several hours, and I normally complete it before I reach the summit. Hopefully there is a manned hut so I can get a beer to celebrate. I usually walk too far and regret that on the way down. While the knees hurt, there is a happy feeling from having wandered so freely in my mind again.

Another nugget from this new age immersion I went through in the mid-eighties is a comment, or more a thought, from then ITIP leader Jaap Voigt. Maybe it was the environment, or the way he said it, but it struck me deeply (another 'aha!'). He said, “Look at that building, say, a skyscraper, think of that building, what was before that building? Drawings from

the architect. And before that? A thought, an idea. In the architect's mind's eye, there was the building." This is the power we humans have. It applies to the material world of buildings but also to the more ephemeral world of relations, of chance, of how things will unfold. It's a capacity for imagination that we unknowingly cherish as kids, we secretly use as adolescents, and often lose as grown-ups. I was lucky to rediscover this power when I was around 23 years old, and have used it ever since, maybe a bit forced with structure (not very spontaneous my wife would rightfully say) but effectively and with great pleasure.

*I usually walk too far and regret that
on the way down*

In addition to the capacity to reflect on one's own role, the context and the dynamics between the two, and to wander freely in the past, present and future including visualizing wishes, the most important qualities (in my mind) for a leader to develop are the capacity to balance options, to recognize dilemmas and to make the right decisions. Here everything comes together: can you have focus, be monomaniacal AND have an open mind that allows different perspectives?

As Alan Matula, the former CIO of Shell, used to say, "Let's admire the problem first." It requires a certain mental patience to do this in our current action-oriented world. For a leader to bring a conversation to the right conclusion, it is key to include all the different views that exist on the topic: to recognize that we have a common goal, but that we may have very different views on how to get there. In order for the organization to realize its objectives, a leader needs to be aware of his own dispositions and create an environment where opposed ideas can mesh. Only then can a common goal become a common purpose. In fact, it is then less about making the decisions and more about the dilemmas and the environment that you create that leads to finding the right course. It's about the mindset that you develop in the

team. If the whole team, the entire organization, starts to incorporate this mode of applying different perspectives, this switching from focus to helicopter view, if people recognize the dilemmas, then you start to develop a mindset that is particularly effective in our global and diverse world.

All your governance, processes and systems, without the right mindset, the right culture, are not going to work

There are lots of ways to encourage this. You can already assess people when they join the organization as to whether they have or can develop this capacity. You can build it into your governance (double roles in a matrix organization for example), make it a part of learning experiences and use it as a criteria for selection to the most senior roles.

Developing such a shared mindset is a key component of a strong culture that keeps an organization sustainably successful in our fast changing world. This is far more effective than reams of regulations, it's more robust than lots of elaborate processes and certainly more efficient than complicated systems. Put differently, you can have all your governance, processes and systems, but without the right mindset, the right culture, it is not going to work.

In the end, Inside the Leader's Mind is actually about grounding. It's about being well rooted in oneself and seeing the multiple perspectives that legitimately exist. This personal development can be very effectively fueled by living and working in different cultures. It provides many opportunities to reflect on one's values and motivations and understand better how behaviors and intentions are perceived by others, and vice versa, and to understand where the other is coming from. It trains the mind to be open. It creates that capacity "to hold two opposing ideas in the mind, and still continue to function" to use my favorite quote once more. Add to this rational mind's eye a good dose of imagination and

I am starting to get sparks of effectiveness and a sense of direction, maybe even purpose. Consciously build it into the DNA of your organization and you will develop a culture that will endure.

I like to take time to use my mind. Or, as Mick Jagger said, "I'm a wandering spirit." And do note: Not all who wander are lost.

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Sander is married to Hendrieke Dirksen, together they have three children who are studying in Amsterdam and Leiden. Besides his corporate activities, he is active in an all natural wine bar called Bar Centraal on the Ten Katestraat in Amsterdam.